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ABSTRACT

In the service of accountability, educators have been emphasizing the student as consumer, client, customer. Consequently, assessment is asking the wrong questions of the wrong people. Outcome measures are often intended to evaluate student and teacher performance rather than to assess teaching and learning. Anthony Petrosky's study of literacy in the Mississippi Delta is a frightening example of how assessment can masquerade as learning. According to the Petrosky study, mandates based on assessment measures typical of the Mississippi School Reform Act are problematic in a number of ways: (1) they focus on solutions such as tests, upward mobility, not processes like teaching and learning; (2) they emphasize basic skills rather than high order critical thinking strategies; (3) they cause friction and isolation among teachers; and (4) they perpetuate outmoded styles of teaching (e.g., recitation rather than discussion). Thomas Angelo and Patricia Cross's "Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers" offers a number of helpful directives that ensure that assessment is a means by which teachers may improve their effectiveness. To respond to the challenge set forth in the handbook, one college-level instructor began assigning the one-minute paper to her students, an in-class writing assignment that required her students to answer 2 questions: first, what was the most important thing learned in class today? and second, what important question remains unanswered? These essays led to spirited classroom discussions and ultimately better teaching and learning. (TB)

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Assessment and Community

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
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In the service of accountability, educators have been emphasizing the student as consumer, client, customer. Using the metaphors of economics and business, we market education as a commodity. This is not surprising since the public and our legislatures increasingly control hiring practices and educational policies--whether or not they understand the issues. Universities are in the position these days of proving their worth. It is no wonder then that assessment is asking the wrong questions of the wrong people. Outcomes measures are often intended to evaluate student and teacher performance, rather than to assess teaching and learning.

Anthony Petrosky's study of literacy in the Mississippi Delta (reported in The Right to Literacy) is a frightening example of how assessment can masquerade as learning. Mississippi's School Reform Act of 1987, mandating largescale changes, seemed successful; the primarily black students from two counties increased their scores on a functional literacy test to 74/80%. (Average score for blacks prior to the reform act was 50%.) On further investigation--visiting classrooms, interviewing teachers, and recording dialogues--Petrosky made some disturbing observations that called into question the role of assessment as it influences educational theories and practices.

Petrosky focused on two different kinds of teachers, illustrating diverse pedagogical approaches. The first approach, representing 90% of the teachers in both counties, was referred to as "traditional teaching," a basic skills approach. Hallways were covered with slogans about basic skills and functional literacy exams, deemed essential for achieving high enough ACT scores to escape to the military or state universities. The

following classroom dialogue conducted by "one of the best teachers" upholds the tradition of authority (indicative of call and response preaching) and rote memorization.

Teacher: *Them* is unacceptable nonstandard what?

Class (in unison): English

Teacher: We're trying to correct our oral and written what?

Class (in unison): Speech

Teacher: This is supposed to help us with our what?

Class (in unison): Themes

Teacher: What does a predicate adjective do?

Class (in unison): Completes the linking verb and describes the subject.

Teacher: The cake tastes delicious. *Delicious* is what part of speech, Oneida?

Student: Predicate adjective.

Teacher: Why don't we use *deliciously*?

Student: Because it's an adverb, and *delicious* describes the cake.

Teacher: Right. Questions? All right, move to page 400.

Petrosky concluded, and rightly so, that "assessment technology has become the teaching method," and while it successfully prepares students to pass exams it does not prepare them for the higher order critical thinking skills necessary to achieve at the college level.

The second pedagogical approach, illustrated by another teacher Petrosky studied (and she was in the minority) did prepare students for college-level work, but not necessarily for high achievement in basic skills. She was not traditional because she did not emphasize rote memory or basic skills. Rather she employed a process oriented pedagogy whereby she used class discussions, writing journals, written essays, conferencing, and peer-editing groups--all standard fare at the college level. Although the majority of this teacher's students passed the essay exam (on the functional literacy test), they did poorly on the grammar skills section. As

Petrosky points out, the teacher was in a "double-bind"--isolated and alienated from the traditional teachers, yet in the mainstream of composition pedagogy and theory. She did not have the energy to fight the other side or develop a sufficient support system.

Mandates based on assessment measures so typical of the Mississippi School Reform Act are problematic in a number of ways, according to Petrosky:

1. They focus on solutions such as tests, upward mobility, not processes like teaching and learning.
2. They emphasize basic skills rather than higher order critical thinking strategies expected at the college level and in the workplace.
3. They can cause friction and isolation among teachers with different philosophies.
4. They perpetuate outmoded styles of teaching (i.e. recitation rather than discussion).

The trend in formative assessment--demonstrated in the Total Quality Management Movement, the work of Thomas Angelo and Patricia Cross, and Richard Leight's Harvard Assessment Seminars--have been a beacon for educators who see assessment as an opportunity to create better learning environments and stronger pedagogies. The new emphasis on classroom assessment promotes these goals. Classroom assessment is formative, meaning that it informs the teacher on successes and failures of classroom practices; and that the teacher can reformulate those practices even in the middle of a term. Some important characteristics of formative assessment, according to Angelo and Cross, are a mutual investment on the part of teachers and students, a context-specific investigation (of not just a course, but a class since each has its own chemistry), and an ongoing

feedback (communication) loop which becomes integral to everyday classroom activity.

The teacher invested in improving the learning environment through a formative approach must share certain assumptions which may at first seem foreign, threatening, and require substantive change--in philosophy, behavior, and practice. Please look at the handout listing the 7 assumptions from Angelo and Cross's Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers.

1. Classroom Assessment does not require specialized training; it can be carried out by dedicated teachers from all disciplines.
2. To improve their effectiveness, teachers need first to make their goals and objectives explicit and then to get specific, comprehensible feedback on the extent to which they are achieving those goals and objectives.
3. The quality of student learning is directly, although not exclusively, related to the quality of teaching. Therefore, one of the most promising ways to improve learning is to improve teaching.

If more faculty had this attitude then outcomes based assessment might be more useful. My university has mandated that departments assess their programs. Responding to the request, our assessment committee chair asked for volunteers to assign short-answer essays or essay exams (already built into the class) which could then be compared with criteria the teachers had already established. Teachers were reluctant, cynical, and resistant to assessment in general and this request in particular. It was obvious they feared evaluation, criticism, and the possibility of having to alter or modify their established practices. The committee chair,

sensitive to these concerns, offered to meet with each volunteer separately to explain the procedure and review the essays. The results were positive; two of the teachers, disturbed that the criteria they had set for the essays (such as analysis, evaluation, synthesis) were not being met, decided that the assignments were not specific enough. The chair, a composition specialist, offered to help the faculty design better essay questions.

4. To improve their learning, students need to receive appropriate and focused feedback early and often; they also need to learn how to assess their own learning. "Students need the opportunities to give and get feedback on their learning before they are evaluated on grades. If they are to become self-directed, lifelong learners, they also need instruction and practice in self-assessment. Some effective techniques include math logs in which students solve problems, explaining how they arrived at each step or discussing where they might have gotten stuck or confused. A similar technique is used in some writing classes; teachers ask students to discuss their writing process, their strengths and weaknesses in the essay.

5. The type of assessment most likely to improve teaching and learning is that conducted by faculty to answer questions they themselves have formulated in response to issues or problems in their own teaching. Such answers can be discovered in time to make a difference in the current course if teachers give midterm evaluations.

6. By collaborating with colleagues and actively involving students in Classroom Assessment efforts, faculty (and students) enhance learning and personal satisfaction. One interesting method is to create student

representatives who report to the teacher whenever an issue or problem arises. Other students in the class can take their concerns to the representative at any time.

7. Systematic inquiry and intellectual challenge are powerful sources of motivation, growth, and renewal for college teachers, and Classroom Assessment can provide such a challenge.

To respond to this challenge, I decided to employ the one-minute paper (which actually takes 5 minutes) in my American Lit class, summer session of 93. The primary goal was to improve my teaching, (maybe even my evaluations) by assessing which classroom activities and discussions were successful, which were less successful, or complete flops. (This really falls under #5 but what resulted falls under #7). The one-minute paper (which I discovered in the first Harvard Assessment Seminar report) can be used at the beginning or end of class. Ask the students:

1. What was the most important thing you learned in class today?
2. What important question remains unanswered?

Right after class, I read the responses, picking out 5 or so questions or issues which I addressed at the beginning of the next class (next day). At first, I devoted this time to clarifying a point, offering additional information, or responding to a concern like, "How do I know if I'm correct in my interpretation?" However, within a few weeks, "I" stopped informing and clarifying; rather I began consciously engaging the class in some student's speculation, theory, or inquiry that sparked my imagination. The resulting discussions were so stimulating that it became

difficult to limit them and proceed with the work of the day. The critical thinking demonstrated in these one-minute papers sparked lively and thoughtful discussions, far exceeding any activity I could have planned.

In analyzing the one-minute responses, I found that students were consistently asking for more information and raising interesting questions. Because their papers often were the springboard for exciting dialogues, they were, in a sense, directing the work of the class. Many students made their concerns, needs, likes and dislikes known to me and seemed to enjoy the chance to express them. Furthermore, this class bonded into a community the likes of which I had never before experienced. In preparing for this presentation, I found the students' responses fell into three categories, all of which I came to appreciate for their pedagogical value. The one-minute papers helped in

1. **Assessing the effectiveness of my teaching methods in class discussion.** Although this was my primary reason for doing the one-minute paper, it was the least interesting and perhaps of lesser value than the others categories. Students were concerned because their analytical skills were poor when reading Puritan poetry. They were concerned about the correct interpretation, reading between the lines, and hidden meanings. The following response provided a beacon, one which I used the next class period to shed light on problems of interpretation.

The most important point I learned in class today was not to try and read things in to literature but to try and read things out of literature. In our class discussion concerning the immaculate conception I think that may be a possible interpretation. However, there does not

seem to be enough evidence from the author to support it.

I felt gratified that some students were coming to understand what is involved in analysis and interpretation. It might be interesting to follow which ones made more progress and why. The distinction between reading in and reading out is an intriguing one and demonstrates a level of engagement I did not expect to see. Although I did not raise the issue in this class, I may very well do so in future classes.

However another response on Puritanism disturbed my pedagogical confidence.

Class in general still somewhat confused about basic Puritan tenets. Question of predestination, for example. Need a more solid definition of Puritanism to say whether or not Bradstreet was a bona fide Puritan.

My confidence was disturbed because I based a reader response paper due prior to class discussion on the question of Bradstreet's Puritanism. I would need to rethink the integrity of the assignment, whether it was sound, and should be adapted or assigned after more discussion of Puritan tenets.

2. **Allowing students to express their likes and dislikes.** Students have little outlet to express their frustrations and tastes. The most positive response was, not surprisingly, in regard to Poe. "I love Poe. Was he a necrophiliac? Poe discussion today was very good. Would like to do more poetry. Have any horror writers since Poe been viewed as creators of classic literature? Will Stephen King be remembered in centuries to come? Horror as a genre seems to be looked down upon."

While the response began as an accolade, and a humorous one at that, it quickly shifted into serious inquiry. I could imagine an interesting

class discussion on horror, even creating an assignment based on the question of horror as classic literature. I might also have suggested this topic for the student's final research paper. It was encouraging to see critical thinking interspersed with personal expression and humor and demonstrates that learning can be enjoyable and a lifelong pursuit.

3. Encouraging and cultivating critical thinking. My original intention was to make critical thinking a separate category, but on close examination, the classification breaks down. If critical thinking includes analysis, skeptical inquiry, synthesis, problem-solving, speculation, then many of my students were clearly demonstrating it in the one-minute papers. The most striking example was from a senior student, a history major responding to Part II (an unanswered question). She writes:

My point about Bradstreet being committed to God through a natural contract was overlooked. The whole idea of Puritanism is more than religion--it is a social "contract" w/in a community, what is surrounded by religion and the way lives interact w/each other, etc. Is my point wrong? I learned various ideas behind social contracts in theory class and wanted to apply it to her life.

This response far exceeded my intentions and expectations. Never did I expect this sort of dialogue to emerge, whereby the student pitted her knowledge and expertise against my own. She was, in fact, informing me and eventually, I had to consult with another professor. I was so excited by her query, that I read it to the class and suggested she continue to explore the issue for extra credit. She wrote a four page paper on how Rousseau's social contract establishes the relation of the individual to the

community. She writes: "The general will represents a unique fact about a community, namely that it has a collective good which is not the same thing as the private interests of its members. In one sense, it lives its own life, fulfills its own destiny and suffers its own fate."

Although I don't want to stretch the analogy too far, the class (in part) modeled Rousseau's notion of community. I became so inspired after teaching The Scarlet Letter, and so reluctant to leave it that I wrote a two page note to the class:

It's hard for me to let go of this work and our probing discussion of it. I have been fueled by our conversations and want desperately to continue them. Many of you have provided insights: Madonna and child motif, Heather causing the fall of Chillingworth, Pearl representing a rebirth (grass of the "new" scarlet letter), gold of Hester's letter leashing and confining the sin--just to name a few.

I speculated on the "gules" of the last line, having been inspired to research the obscure reference, and ended my dialogue by inviting students to continue the search: "Let me know if you get farther than I did." My greatest reward as a teacher would be to find out they did.